



News Release

STATE OF MARYLAND

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

Martin O'Malley
Governor

Anthony G. Brown
Lt. Governor

Gary D. Maynard
Secretary

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Mark Vernarelli (410) 339-5065

Victims' Rights Week Ceremony at North Branch Includes Pleas---and a Tree

TOWSON, MD (April 15 2008)---Wearing two-toned ribbons to commemorate National Crime Victims' Rights Week, fifty citizens, state correctional employees, and elected officials gathered at North Branch Correctional Institution Tuesday to honor victims and dedicate a tree in their honor.

"I absolutely love this tree," said North Branch Warden John Rowley of the weeping cherry tree, which showed a hint of blooming despite the recent cold snap. "I love the fact that our staff and our inmates' families will be walking past this tree to come in."

The hour-long ceremony, attended by Allegany County State's Attorney Michael Twigg, Sheriff David Goad, Del. Leroy Myers, citizen crime watch members from Bel Air and Cresaptown, and about two dozen uniformed correctional officers and other North Branch employees, also included a plea from Division of Correction Victim Services Coordinator Debra Neighoff for all to keep working hard for victims.

Ms. Neighoff, a 30-year veteran of the DOC, praised both her division's and Maryland Public Safety and Correctional Services Secretary Gary Maynard's expanding efforts to help inmates pay society back by doing everything from planting trees to participating in victim-offender dialogue and attending classes designed to teach inmates the devastating impact of their crimes on the victims' families. And she reminded the attendees that it wasn't always so.

"I want to do whatever I can to honor victims," said NBCI's Sean Shockey, the institution's chief victim service coordinator whose idea it was to hold the ceremony. "I have seen many positive changes since I've been involved in victims' rights. Crime affects every single one of us."

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The North Branch ceremony is among a half-dozen major events at Division of Correction and DPSCS facilities in Maryland designed to keep victims' needs in the forefront during the national Victims' Rights Week. And even the inmates are involved: in Hagerstown, more than 600 inmates will participate in a walk-a-thon this weekend, donating their own money and collecting sponsorships from others to benefit the Maryland Criminal Injuries Compensation Board, which helps victims of serious crimes recover some expenses.

Ms. Neighoff, who is responsible for all DOC victim programs in every prison, told the crowd that victims now have access to a variety of services designed to keep them apprised of their rights and keep track of their offenders' movements through the system. "I can remember when we didn't even know what to say, how to talk to victims," she said.

After Jordan Kline of Mt. Ridge High School sang the National Anthem, North Branch Public Information Officer Gary Sindy, the event's organizer, asked for a moment of silence to remember victims. Chaplain Kevin Lamp, whose mother made the ribbons worn by attendees, then prayed "for the victims to become victors," while reminding all never to forget those torn apart by crime.

At the end, North Branch's Warden Rowley and Assistant Warden Richard Graham Jr. led a group in pulling the cover to reveal the tree's plaque. It says: "This tree is dedicated to victims everywhere whose lives have been changed by the effects of crime."

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